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AUTHOR Willy, Todd G.
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ABSTRACT

Various aspects of 145 representative oral and written compositions of six- and seven-year-old new literates are discussed in this paper. The determination to label these compositions as "primitive fiction" was made primarily on the assumption that children's first attempts at fictive narrative take on the aspects of their cultural literary heritage, as each child reweaves the unique complexities of oral language patterns. Discussed are such topics as evidence of listener awareness, stylistic and rhetorical contrivances, and individualization in plots and motifs. It was concluded as follows: that through representative and interpretive projections, newly literate children show a marked preference for reappraising and reorganizing received literature in relation to their own sense of creative awareness; that the most predominate conventional patterns in the newly literate child's fiction are those which most resemble conventional aspects of oral traditional literature; and that the literature of newly literate children is a sophisticated form of primitive art which should be judged on its own terms and not by standards of contemporary adult literature. (TS)

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ORAL ASPECTS IN THE PRIMITIVE FICTION OF NEWLY LITERATE CHILDREN[1]

Todd G. Willy
University of California
Berkeley

Like other categories of maturation, children's cognitive speech development is the object of varying and diverse study. Among the numerous research done in the field of verbal cognition, there have been studies of the effect of language on concept development (Vytgotsky)[2] and studies of the aspects of mental processes on verbal thought patterns (Piaget, Inhelder).[3] But whatever the methodology used to study the maturation of cognitive language processes in young children, the conclusions reached are similar, viz., that the child goes through inchoate "stages," becoming more and more advanced until eventually in the later cognitive stage the maturation has developed to a point which will permit intricate "adult" thought processes. It has been suggested by the noted Swiss psychologist Piaget, for instance, that a child in the Intuitive Thought Stage of development (4 to 7 or 8 years of age) is capable of very little communication behavior other than egocentric speech patterning.[4] In one study designed by Piaget to measure the amount of listener responsiveness in a child of six, the experimenter tells a complex, turgid story to a child, the child is then told to relate the story intact to a second child. When the child inevitably confuses and garbles the story, Piaget is led to the conclusion that children in this age bracket tend not to communicate effectively

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"principally because they fail to take account of the listener's viewpoint."[5]

In contrast to the inferences drawn by Piaget and others, the following qualitative analysis of 145 narratives, both written and oral, of six and seven year old new literates studied in the present research, tends to show that children of this age are not only capable of great listener awareness but also synthesize their stories to blend uniqueness of plot structure with multiple facets of oral style tradition.[6] The children's stories under consideration were studied, then, not only with an ear to aspects of listener awareness (interest in plot structure, tension between episodes, denouement) but were also studied with a concern for form of expression. Among the distinctive features found to be remnants of archaic oral tradition in the children's language were their choice of idiom, their use of obsolete words, the set number of repetitions in their stories, their formalized openings and closings, and other such stylistic features which distinguish conventional oral tradition from other forms of literature. In approaching the problem of the creativity in the stories, emphasis was given to the new literate's ability to modify, reinterpret, and adapt ancient story types to their own cultural and personalized world view. In this way the following account, based upon an analysis of the 145 oral and written compositions, offers an alternative viewpoint with which to study the way in which the impact of tradition and culture influences the maturation of the creative process. It is hoped that the present research raises the possibility of seeing in the narratives of new literates the dynamic nature of fictive writing development and the advantages of considering their primitive literary endeavors as important tributaries to the main stream of cultural progress, rather than as mere eddies of purile egocentric chatter.

Research most closely related to the present study falls into three categories: studies concerned with oral factors in literature, the teaching of creative writing to children, and material presented by folklorists concerning oral transmission. Other areas of overlapping interest for the subject matter of this paper are in the fields of linguistics, rhetoric, psychology, and anthropology.

One of the difficulties of discussing a subject that lies in the borderland of a number of well-established fields of study is the choice of language and definitions. Adoption of the broadest descriptive meaning of the terms "oral," "verbal," and "formula," is necessary to retain flexibility in the general accounting of various forms of oral and written literary genres. The conventional denotive meanings will be used, i.e., "oral" will refer to speech which is extemporaneously composed and spoken by word of mouth; "verbal" will designate words, whether spoken or written, in which a thought is conveyed; and "formula" will refer to a group of words which is regularly employed in oral or written narrative to express a given essential idea.[7] The referents of these terms are not totally satisfactory in conveying the essential meaning. "Oral formulary" for instance, in its denotive meaning, is a form which derives from uttered speech and is in the oral tradition, yet it is quite possible for oral formularies to be written down and handed from one generation to another. Admittedly of limited utility, the terms"oral," "verbal," and "formula" nevertheless call attention to gross differences in literary techniques used in varying conventional genres.

EVIDENCE OF LISTENER AWARENESS[8]

It is perhaps all too hastily agreed upon by investigators in the field of child psychology and linguistics, that although a child of six

might "know" his basic core vocabulary, he is unlikely to be able to functionally use his verbal knowledge to perform mental operations akin to adult reasoning.[9] Piaget, for instance, distinguishes two functions that language performs for a six year old; that of the social and egocentric. In socialized speech the child wishes to communicate, and considers his listener. With egocentric speech behavior the child has no concern for the listener and babbles on to himself, not bothering to know to whom he is speaking or if he is being listened to. Piaget suggests that for a child of six and one-half years old, most of his speech may be egocentric.[10]

Although it is true that language no doubt serves these functions for six and seven year olds, the corpus of material gathered for the present paper tends to indicate that a child of six is likely to have absorbed far more adult functional speech behavior in his knowledge of language structure than has been heretofore assumed.

Each story gathered for the research was created by the child in a raconteur-audience-classroom community, a situation conducive to the hypothesis that the preferred audience for each story was children. But whether this hypothesis is so, or the alternative hypothesis that the preferred audience for the child story-teller was in most cases the adult recorder of the story, the evidence suggests that an audience <u>was</u> taken into consideration. Where the new literate is permitted freedom and originality, audience considerations apparently become an important factor in the creative process of children's primitive fiction, for one of the major needs which the stories serve for these newly literate six and seven year olds is their entertainment value in the classroom.

This contention is perhaps best illustrated through emphasizing by means of a graph, the internal evidences in the structure of the texts;

in particular 1) plot changes, 2) tension between episodes, and 3) denouements.[11] Although such a graph has the definite limitation of being able only to approximate the relationships between these functional elements, this method of analysis does have the advantage of having been applied to all of the texts uniformly. Granted that any such measurement of relationships between episodes must be somewhat subjective, one can nevertheless make essentially reliable determinations of tensions between episodes based upon a graduated scale. This graphic method clearly shows that the majority of the children's stories entail the chief artistic requirement of all stories told for entertainment value: that they hold the attention of the listener and keep him in suspense, anxious to hear the denouement. The technique is illustrated below using the text of the following example:

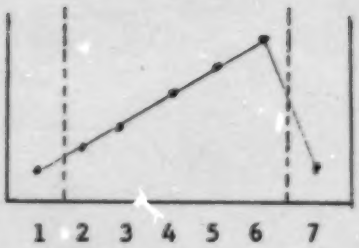
How I Got Captured

(Six Year-old Author)

(1) I was playing in my garden and (2) I saw a witch holding poisonous water. (3) And I called my Mommy and Daddy and there was no answer. (4) I ran inside and straight to my Mom and Dad's room and I saw their poisonous water. (5) Then I saw the witch at the door. (6) And she took me back to her cave and ate me for dinner and (7) that's how she captured me.

A sequential breakdown of the seven episodal sentences reveals the following relationships in tension structure:

Evidence of Listener Awareness as Shown by
Relationships in Tension Structure
and Changes in Plot



• Episode

¦ Main turning in plot

Of the 145 narratives analyzed in this manner, 132 showed a similar--in most cases identical--pattern: an upward and graduated crescendo of tension climaxed and released by a sudden denouement. This analysis of the texts conforms to personal observations of the children in the act of composing: the child concentrates upon and exploits familiar techniques of gaining listener attention (viz., loudness, emphatic gestures, declarations that the "truth" will at last be told, hints at unmentionable secrets, announcements of miraculous occurrences, melodramatic descriptions of violence, etc.). But of greater significance is the fact that all of these techniques--as well as the typical tension-mounting plot patterns--are contained and expressed as literary conventions. That is, the child composes and recites his tale in the same manner in which adults in their society have composed and recited tales, accepting as "correct" local and

traditional methods of gaining, holding, and satisfying audiences. What must be understood, however, is that these story-telling conventions are not identical to those of highly educated, extensively well-read, silently reading and silently composing adults: on the contrary, the newly literate child chooses to emulate and to adopt conventions which are residuals in our literary heritage, the same methods exploited by adults who engage in oral composition.

STYLISTIC AND RHETORICAL CONTRIVANCES IN THE FICTION OF NEWLY LITERATE CHILDREN

There is no ultimate lacuna between past and present; written literary traditions are integrated into a web of continuity and are inherently related to oral traditions. However, the nature of verbal communication has a considerable effect upon the type and style of narrative prose. Since all orally transmitted stories are communicated between individuals in face-to-face situations, and are prone to the diminishing effects of the transmutations of memory, there is a simplistic, concrete directness of relationship between symbol and referent. The results for literature is that oral tradition story-telling patterns are significantly restricted to formulas and conventions, viz., repetition, parallelism, allegory, and standard forms of imagery and stereotypes. In this way the form of oral narrative differs considerably in both style and language from written prose.

Of great importance in assessing the preponderance of oral formula in the fictive narratives of newly literate children is that the stories most often read to young children are based upon models which are survivors of earlier periods and are designed for a listening, not a reading audience.[12] Although many of the tales written for children are modern in authorship, their forms are new literary variants of older archetypes.

The newly literate child, with his rapid development of language patterns, finds the rich reservoir of oral tradition-based fairy tales and folklore of inestimable inspiration and of constant usefulness in developing his own creative productions. The results generated by such influences upon the children are that the newly literate child's stories are themselves striated with oral formulas and oral tradition in both style and structure. Through the technique of listening and learning, the foundation of oral tradition in story telling is built into the normative language process of the newly literate child. He is unconsciously and consciously assimilating the stories and nursery rhymes and becoming acquainted with the heroes, their stereotypic behavior, and an imagined and imaginative picture of rural life in semifeudal times. At the same time the oral phrases or formulas are being absorbed by the six year old. At this period in the child's life he is composing stories closer than at any other time in his experience to the original language, content, and theme of the traditional oral tales of his ancestors. It is typical of newly literate children to compose their fictive narratives as Märchens, animal fables, fabliaux, riddles, etc.--forms common in the traditional fiction of their pre-literate and nominally literate progenitors.[13] Only rarely do the children adopt the narrative forms preferred by most of their contemporary and literary elders, forms which are almost always composed as well as read silently and in isolation:verisimilar short stories and novels, semifictional autobiographies, memoires, histories, essays, comic-strip scenarios, etc. In general, this is probably attributable to the fact that children of this age level do not read extensively in these silently composed forms, nor do they often hear them, for it is not a habit of adults

to read such forms aloud to their offspring. It is not surprising, therefore. that among the 145 texts under present consideration, 119 are clearly narratives which essentially rely upon older and strongly oral literary traditions,[14] and in fact nearly all of these 119 are derivatives of only two forms, the Märchen and the fable. If there is a significant preference among these children, it is for the Märchen.

The texts of three Märchen forms are given below as stereotypic examples. The three tales were selected primarily to illustrate the range of variance which occurs in the larger sample as to their length, their originality, their formality, and their literary merit. The categorization of style which follows in the chart by no means exhausts the varied results of the intermingling of the streams of oral traditions and children's primitives, but it is hoped that the headings may provide useful concepts for discussion of the relations between oral style and children's fictive writing.

Example #1

The Crazy Peanut

(Six-Year-Old Author)

Once upon a time there was an old lady who 1
liked to plant peanuts. And she planted a peanut 2
tree, and a peanut fell off the tree and the old 3
lady said to herself "I'd better get outside and 4
get that peanut." And so she did. But when she 5
got there the peanut started running and running. 6
And the old lady wouldn't stop chasing it. But 7

after a little while she began to get tired, so she stopped, and rested in the pretty flowers. And before she knew it peanuts starting chasing her. And the peanuts frightened her away from home. So she never ever did go back to home. And the peanut lived in her house for ever. The old lady died but the peanut didn't and if you want to know what the peanut looked like he had a long white beard and he had eighteen great-great grandchildren and that's the end. Of the crazy peanut.

Example #2

The Prince and Princess Who Wanted to Marry

(Six-Year-Old Author)

Once upon a time there was a princess and a prince. But the king said that the princess couldn't marry the prince. So one day the prince and the princess went for a walk. They went to the prince's home. They played checkers. They played hide and seek together. They played other games too. They had lots and lots of fun. Then it was night and the princess had to go. The princess said bye-bye to the prince. The prince said bye-bye to the princess. The king said "Where have you been?" The princess said "I don't know." Then the prince came and said "Do

you want to have dinner with me?" The king said "The princess cannot have dinner with you." Then, when the king and queen went to sleep the prince and the princess tip-toed down the stairs so they would not wake the king and queen up. Then after that they married each other and then the king and queen got used to the prince in the house. The End.

Example #3

The Wandering Eyes

(Six-Year-Old Author)

Once there was a little girl, and she had eyes that wandered all around the world. They even wandered up to Mars, to Vulcan, to Jupiter, to Saturn, to A.E.I.O.U.Z.

"Stop your eyes from wandering," said her mother.

"I can't," said the girl. And she began to cry.

Now in that city, every child who cried was spanked by her or his mother. So the mother spanked her. And the child cried even more. Her mother spanked her again. The child ran from the room. She went into the garden where no one could hear her. She layed on the

beautiful flowers there and cried.

When she was old enough to get married, she found a lovely young man, who loved her just as well. She fell in love. They got married and had children. The children grew up to be beautiful, happy, and obeyant. The father worked at a shop. They had many customers, and soon they were very rich.

Then the father went to the King as all men have to.

The King said, "Poop, poop, young man."

The young man father said, "P.P. your Majesty." For that was the custom of being polite to that country.

Suddenly the King said, "Why do your eyes wander?"

He answered the King, "I don't know, your Majesty." (For the husband had gotten it from his wife.) His eyes wandered up to the King's crown and scepter. He said to the King, "I want to be King instead of you."

"Your eyes wandered to my mind. Throw him in jail!" shouted the King. "We'll have him hung in a few days."

So the father was hung and that is how the wandering eye brought death to a man. The End.

The sample of 145 stories was taken randomly from a collection which originally was made with no regard paid as to which stories had been for the most part composed silently and in writing and which essentially had been composed out loud and extemporaneously; the collectors, like the children themselves in the act of composition, had not been instructed, and showed no awareness that these two conventional methods were--or should be -- regarded as distinct or as mutually exclusive. Orally composed stories were recorded on a typewriter as they were being told, and the children were fully aware that their stories were, in that sense, being "written down" rather than simply "heard." Nevertheless, typical devices of oral style are so predominate and pre-eminent among all of these compositions as to make a schematization of those features at once both appropriate and convenient. The following chart, based upon the three Märchens which were selected as representative, by no means exhausts the detectable features of oral style which appear in them, but it does indicate those which are typical of these newly literate authors and gives as well some measure of how extensively they exploit identical stylistic techniques. Despite very marked differences in many literary dimensions of the fiction of these children, these particular features of oral style are in all of them a common property:

Devices of Oral Style in Three
Representative Märchens

	Formulary Endings, Introductions	Repetitios Alliterations	Contrasted and Generic Characters	Formulary Transitions	Formal Epilogues	Asyndetons[15] and Antithesis
The Crazy Peanut Example #1	"Once upon a time there was . . . " "And that's the end. Of the crazy peanut."	"plant peanuts" "planted a peanut" "running and running" "never ever" "looked like" "that's the"	"old lady" "the peanut"	"and" (eleven times) "but" (twice) "so" (twice)	Lines 12-17	"And the peanuts frightened her away from home. So she neverever did go back to home." "The old lady died but the peanut didn't."
The Prince and Princess Who Wanted to Marry Example #2	"Once upon a time there was . . . " "The End"	"bye-bye" "bye-bye" "lots and lots" "Just somewhere" "Just somewhere" "tip-toed" "they" "they played" "they played" "they played" "they"	"princess" "king" "queen"	"so" (once) "then" (five times)	Lines 18-20	"They played checkers. They played hide and seek. They played other games too."
The Wandering Eyes Example #3	"Once there was . . . " "The End"	"cried . . . " "cried . . . " "cried . . . " "spanked . . . " "spanked . . . " "spanked . . . " "spanked . . . " "P.P." "Poop, poop"	"little girl" "young man" "king" "mother"	"and" (once) "now" (once) "so" (twice) "when" (once) "then" (once) "suddenly" (once)	Lines 39-40	"beautiful, happy, and obeyant." ". . . to Mars, to Vulcan, to Jupiter, to Saturn, to A.E.I.O.U.Z."

As the chart suggests, among the most conspicuous features of these märchens is their authors' scrupulous adherence to utterly conventional formularies. In these stories, as in those of which they are representative, it can be predicted with all but complete certitude that in the first phrase there will be the word "once" or "one" ("Once upon a time," "There was once," "One day," "Once there was," etc.) and that the last two words of the story will be "The End." Similarly, involved and/or extended transitions do not occur; the words "and," "but," "so," "then," hold the story together with an economy which borders on ellipsis. The characters in these stories could hardly be more familiar: they have generic rather than proper names and they have been stereotyped through the application of ruthless dichotomies: all are either good or bad, heroic or villainous, young or old, parents or children, royalty or commoners, male or female, natural or supernatural, animal or vegetable. Nor are we likely to fail to either find or to understand the meaning and the moral of the tale, for it will be stated in a flat declaration of what finally happened to the major characters, and it will be contained in the passage which immediately precedes the words "The End."

The newly literate child's penchant for formularies is matched by a use of figurative devices which is extraordinarily narrow both in range and function. The preferred devices are based upon a simple repetition, either of initial syllables (alliteration) or of words or phrases (repetitions). Simplicity is a keynote; the initial phoneme is almost never repeated more than once, the word or phrase rarely more than twice, usually verbatim, usually in immediately sequential sentences. The simplicity of these figures, like that of the formularies, is for the most part a corollary of their function, for these six-year-olds, in an unstructured classroom situation, almost always

choose to invent their stories out loud, extemporaneously. Such a compositional method requires techniques which are familiar to the point of being habitual, which facilitate such basic inventional tasks of deciding how to begin the tale, who should be in it, what happens next, how the story ends.. These particular figures are appropriate to those ends, in that by merely repeating sounds, words, or phrases, the author can amplify his invention, expand his story, make it longer, emphasize by saying again, with minimal effort as well as minimal chances of confusion. This in turn allows the composer to simultaneously free the mind, giving it time to think of what probably--or should--happen next in the story.

The two other stylistic figures commonly employed by these authors, asyndeton and antithesis, are also noteworthy for their simplicity and serve identical functions. For example, the catalogue of actions "They played . . . They played . . . They played . . . " is not only introduced by repetitio but is in and of itself simply repetitious and additive in that "checkers" and "hide and seek" are of the same class of action and are also summarized by "other games too." The two antithesis in "The Crazy Peanut" also contain repetitions ("away from home . . . back to home," "died . . . didn't die.") and their opposites of denotative meaning result from the most elementary kind of syntactical and semantic inversions. Or to put it another way, the action line is forwarded and the story made longer in this latter case simply by saying the same thing "backwards."

Despite the seemingly obligatory reliance of these newly literate composers upon rigid formularies and elementary stylistic devices, there is nevertheless considerable evidence of individuality in the style of all but a very few of their stories. Indeed it could be argued that these children demonstrate rather more

individual creativity than the average adult within their culture, for, unlike their elders, they apparently do not consider even the most conventional formularies to be either empty of meaning or sacrosanct. For example, although well over nine out of ten of these 145 tales conclude with the set phrase "The End," in at least a dozen the phrase served functions beyond the traditional one of marking the cessation of the narrative. Three children exploited the phrase as a vulgar pun referring to human and/or animal posteriors and went to some effort to insure that their audience would not miss the joke. In one case the phrase was written at the end of a story about a cat and was carefully positioned upon the paper so as to be at the very end of the tail of an accompanying illustration of the animal. In yet another, the formulary was written "The END," both the quotation marks and the full capitals drawing attention to and re-emphasizing the purience of the story's climactic final phrase: " . . . she had ants in her pants." In a similar manner the slang meaning of the phrase (i.e., "This is really the end") was occasionally highlighted by putting the phrase--and ending the narrative--at a point where the dramatic action had become either wildly incredible or excessively tragic. And as is the case in "The Crazy Peanut," several stories contained additional material after the formulary--usually the title of the story but sometimes the epilogue or even another formulary: "goodbye," "that's all," "continued next time," etc. Introductory formularies appear to be somewhat more stable, but one story begins with a remarkably successful and syncopated admixture of the conventional "Once upon a time" and "Long ago": "One time ago . . . "

Individualization--signs that the authors are engaged in imaginative and creative invention--is, although demonstrable, far more rare in the formularies

of these newly literate children's compositions than it is in their diction levels and in their use of rhetorical figures. It is, in fact, in the variety of diction levels which they employ and in the variety and complexity of their figurative usage that these authors differ the most, both from their silently writing and reading elders and from each other. Unlike the majority of modern English-speaking literate adults, these children have yet to accept the restricted and homogenized diction of our times: like their pre-Georgian ancestors, they see nothing incongruous in narrating a single tale in the entirely correct but totally archaic "obeyant," the perfectly formal "for that was the custom," the simple colloquial "they got married," and the scatological vulgar "poop, poop." Nor do such drastic shifts from one diction level to another require, insofar as these authors are concerned, any transition, any explanation, any particularly narrow, unusual, or idiosyncratic purpose. They exploit the levels of English diction freely and spontaneously, a phenomenon which partially accounts for the vivacity and freshness of their art while it also demonstrates their indebtedness to Renaissance and earlier models. The degree of that exploitation, however, varies from child to child, as does their adherence to conventional syntax, and although all of them are likely to shock the sensitivities of an adult and professional strict grammarian, each of them is likely to do it in his or her own way. A comparable if not even greater variety is noticeable in these newly literate composers' use of figures: the children typically employ figures which are characteristic of, and appropriate to, oral compositions, but no two children employ those figures in an identical manner of style. This individuality becomes obvious upon the application of any one of several criteria: (1) the relative complexity of their figurative usage, (2) the relative frequency of their

figurative usage (3) the variety of the types of figures employed, and (4) the originality of individual figures. In the "Wandering Eyes," for example, the language is extremely figurative; even the title is a figure of speech and there is at least one obvious figure in every paragraph except the third. The variety of types of figures and their relative complexity is far greater than that found in stories of most of the other children: there is, for example, a humorous scatological and simultaneously euphemistic correctio made up of two alliterated repetitios: ("Poop, poop, young man," "P. P., your Majesty."). There are two paralleled asyndetons, from the world to Mars to Vulcan to Jupiter to Saturn; from A to Z--in which the beginning and the end of the solar system is extended and simultaneously compared to the beginning and the end of the alphabet, an alphabet in which the vowels, like the planets, are five in number.[16] There is an exclamatio ("Throw him in jail!"), a hyperbole ("all around the world"), a paralipsis ("for the husband had gotten it from his wife"), a sententia ("as all men have to"). All of these figures are original in their function, most in their phraseology, but none more so than the paralipsis, "For that was the custom of being polite to that country." Here the grammatically "incorrect" use of the preposition "to" in the phrase "to that country" has the rhetorical effect of re-ordering the figure into a persuasively credible translatio, an equation in which majesty equals king equals a kingdom equals a territory (in which the requirements of decorum, the eccentric behavior of the ruler, and the sovereignty itself are one and the same).

In stark contrast to the stylistic showiness of "The Wandering Eyes," is the plainly told story of "The Prince and the Princess Who Wanted to Marry,"

a tale in which the author relies almost exclusively upon a single habit of composition: repetition. The sentences are redundant in their syntax, almost always flat declaratives, neither subtle nor ambiguous. The figures employed are equally repetitive and unoriginal ("bye-bye," "lots and lots," "tip-toed"). The single asyndeton is itself an elementary extension of a simplistic repetition ("They played . . . They played . . . They played . . .) Transitions are marked by a reliance upon the single word "then," often followed or preceded immediately by a redundant synonym ("then when," "then after that," "and then"). Grammatical patterns, once begun, are reluctantly relinquished; five immediately sequential sentences begin with "They," immediately followed by four which begin with "The." The generic names of the characters are repeated remorselessly, with no attempt made whatsoever to modify with an adjective or to relieve with an occasional synonym; in half a page the word "princess" occurs a dozen times, "prince" eleven times, and "king" seven times.

So preponderant is the repetitiousness of "The Prince and Princess Who Wanted to Marry" that only a very careful reader is likely to notice the ellipsis which occurs between lines 4 and 10. The scene of the action has moved, without us being told, from the prince's "house" to the princess's "house," but the audience is unlikely to pay any heed to that fact, for in this story, after all, one "house" is exactly the same as another. Most newly literate children, as has already been noted, extensively employ repetition and other repetitious devices, but this author has found in this technique, her own particular style. Her own exclusiveness is expressed by--and is a product of--an unwavering repetitiousness, a constant exploitation of this single stylistic technique to the point where she distinguishes

herself from the majority of both her peers and her elders. This author eschews such startling and fortuitous devices as the personification of a "crazy peanut." Nor does she, in any of her stories, tamper with a commonplace, as happens, for example, in a fable written by one of her classmates in which a duck kisses a cat one million times, so literally "to death" that the cat, to our surprise, "died of kisses." But what she does do is carry repetition so far that her own stories are often retellings of stories repeated endlessly in the lives of people around her; in this case the story that courtship is followed, almost as night follows day, by marriage.

INDIVIDUALIZATION IN PLOTS AND MOTIFS;
THE NEWLY LITERATE CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

What has been noted here about the formularies, diction levels, and use of rhetorical figures in the style of newly literate children'sfiction is reflected as well in this fiction's plots and motifs. That is, the child author demonstrates a strong preference for materials as well as techniques which are conventional and founded in oral traditions. At the same time, individualization is already apparent in the stories composed by these six-year-olds, noticeable not only in their respective styles but also in their modifications of plots and motifs to conform to their own personal interests, perceptions, and intents. This latter characteristic, the extreme license in their literary inventiveness, is unlikely to escape the detection of even the most casual adult observer, for unlike their pre-literate ancestors, these children demonstrate scant interest in either preserving or perpetuating received stories in their original form. On the contrary, they invent their stories without apparent reserve, adding to, omitting, combining, inverting,

re-ordering and disordering plots and motifs of older oral tradition stories however and whenever they wish. And each of these authors accomplishes those literary tasks in his or her own way; as is the case with their stylistic usages, the variance among them in the handling of plots and motifs equals or exceeds the homogeneity in those qualities which distinguishes them from both their pre-literate predecessors and their literary elders.

Simultaneously at both ends of the spectrum in terms of these larger structures of fiction, plot, and motif, is the story of "The Crazy Peanut." On the one hand, the story is obviously derivative; the plot and characters have been taken directly from the familiar tale of the "Johnnycake Man," who, having been created in an oven by a lonesome old woman, flees from her home only to be at last outwitted and consumed by a sly and hungry fox. But in the child's version, plot and characters have undergone such drastic revisions that by line 6 we have a story which is, to say the very least, idiosyncratic. The translation of a Johnnycake born in an oven into a peanut raised upon a tree is neither startling nor particularly original, but the addition of the modifier "crazy" is both. It instantly signals the audience that wild aberrations in and deviations from the conventional story are about to take place. Suddenly it is the old lady who must flee, and hurry on to a denouement which constitutes a drastic reversal: she, not the peanut, perishes. Perhaps even more startling are the implications of the epilogue in which the crazy peanut attains longevity, a home, and a plethora of descendants (traditional ingredients of happiness) not because of his virtues or his wisdom but because of his--more correctly, his creator's--rebellious audacity. So much for conventional poetic justice and traditional social values, for here,

simply because of the peanut's "craziness" and because the old lady "wouldn't stop chasing it," the traditional heroine dies in exile and the traditional villain refuses to accept his role and triumphs in the end. It is the newly literate author here who, acting individually, determines the rights and wrongs of the matter, not the conventions of either the original story or society in general. It is important to notice also that the story, although idiosyncratic and even anachronistic in its reversals of plot, character, and moral import, is in no way indeterminate, in no way so chaotic as to defy comprehension. On the contrary, it is as lucid and as accessible as that upon which it was modeled.

The specific and immediate literary source of these children's stories, be they Märchens, fables, or less common forms, are rarely so obvious as in the case just noted. Indeed, less than 5 percent of the entire sample employed in this analysis were recognizable as variants of a single and particular story to which the author or authors had obviously been exposed. It is far more typical of these newly literate authors to absorb and then to blend together, plots and motifs from hundreds of stories, often distilling these abstractions into highly generalized concentrates. Thus in "The Prince and Princess Who Wanted to Marry," the familiar and generic characters of countless Märchens--King, Queen, Prince, Princess--have been reduced to mere commoners, and the most rigidly stereotyped commoners at that: utterly conventional and totally universal fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters who are involved in and who resolve the timeless difficulties of courtship, elopement, and parentally disapproved marriages. There is nothing about this tale's

plot, characters, or motifs which is distinctive; those features in this case are simply common denominators of the characters, plots, and motifs commonly found in traditional Märchens composed by adults. But what is original here is the author's ultra-laconic stance, a consistent and extreme insouciance which is partially a product of the story's stylistic repetitiveness, partially a product of the resolution presented in its epilogue. In place of a conventional and sententious societal ideal there is a flat statement of what the author (and the more skeptical reader), takes to be normative behavior, a king and queen who just "got used to the prince in the house." The author's individual touch is not dramatic in comparison with that of the authors of "The Crazy Peanut" and "The Wandering Eyes," but it is sufficient to deal a fatal blow to the conventionality of the oral tradition stories from which it was derived.

The originality of the inventions in the fiction of these newly literate authors is, as has been suggested, most often achieved by means of a simultaneous reinforcement and undercutting of conventional characters, plots, and motifs. That is, the audience is presented with familiar materials and then surprised by means of a reversal or drastic diminution of the expectations which are conventionally associated with those same materials.

In "The Crazy Peanut," villains and heroes are turned inside out; in "The Prince and Princess Who Wanted to Marry," a king and queen are shown as entirely bereft of either moral or parental authority; in "The Wandering Eyes," the heroine's heroic husband, wealthy, and fecund, turns revolutionary and, at the end of a traditionally long and productive life, is unceremoniously hung. Precisely how this strategy is exploited is, of course, a

matter of the individual author's choice, and as can be seen in the following examples the possibilities are endless. Typical examples of originality in invention include (1) A king bigamously, incestuously, and self-righteously marries one of his two young daughters, his queen retaliates by eloping with an elephant, and they all live happily ever after; (2) Two children on their way through a forest to grandmother's house meet a fox; unlike Red Riding Hood, they attempt to escape by jumping into the ocean and they drown; (3) A princess swallows a pea and becomes so ill that she must spend five years in a hospital--afterwards, of course, she grasps the "true" significance of what happened and "she never ate peas again"; (4) A familiar old lady lives in a familiar old house, but this one is made of "burgundy-colored bricks"; (5) A generically nice child "knits" a magical "electric sign"; (6) Two sweet little cupcakes end up fighting each other, lose their frosting in the process, and "throw themselves away" into a garbage can.

In sum, these children typically draw upon and make original and creative use of the plots, motifs, and characters of classic oral tradition stories, but they almost never repeat them verbatim nor do they often attempt to compose a close facsimile. They can, of course, be directed or taught to present a recitation rather than an individual creation, but in the unstructured teaching situation in which these stories were composed, the telling of such a story as the following must be looked upon as a rare exception:

The Ghost of the Little Girl
(Six-Year-Old Author)

Once there was a little girl, and then one day she died. They put her in a diamond coffin, and they carried the coffin with some beautiful flowers. Then one day the ghost of the little

girl came out and said: "I'll put you alive again, because your mother and father are so-o sad about you."

And the little girl said, "I like it in heaven."

But the ghost said, "You'll have to go back to earth, because your mother and father are so sad without you."

"Alright," said the girl.

The parents were overjoyed to see their daughter.

THE END

This is a classic Märchen, a retelling of a complete tale in an entirely conventional manner. The dark and somber theme of the supernatural is a substantial and integral part of the story from beginning to end; the plot being no more than a simplified version of thousands of stories in which a heroine in the role of martyr triumphs over death and returns to earth to placate those who loved her. Such tales, with a revenant as their central motif, have been common in ballads and Märchens since at least the time of the Crusades, and in them, typically, a dead mother returns to suckle her neglected child, or a dead child returns to stop the otherwise inconsolable grief of its parents.[17] Or, to put it another way, the child author in this instance tells us exactly what we expected to hear, a story which, with modest variations, we have already heard before. Even the figures, the hyperbolous "diamond coffin" and the commonplace "beautiful flowers," are

conventions, as much so as the "little girl" herself and her imperious "ghost."

But while the story, in comparison to Märchens composed by adults in previous centuries, is entirely unexceptional, it is, in comparison to Märchens, composed by the child's peer group, an anomaly. The author of "The Ghost of the Little Girl" upholds social and literary values and forms which are both common and acceptable; the author's classmates more often than not ignore or even attack those values. Few of their characters remain either heroic or villainous throughout a story, few of their epilogues reflect a preference for viewpoints which are other than the author's personal viewpoint, few of them are reluctant when it comes to blending into the most saccharine of tales a scatalogical joke, an obscene referent, a dash of evil triumphant, an occasional four-letter expletive.[18] Like their adult predecessors, they rely upon oral devices and have a predilection for such obsolete and unfashionable literary techniques as alliteration. But here too, they are, in comparison, somewhat more uninhibited, somewhat more original, far more attracted to extremes. More common in the new literate's fiction, in fact, than either classic Märchens or paraphrases of familiar fables, are stories in which we learn nothing other than the alliterated fact that there was once a bee who lived with "some flies and some fleas and [a] farmer." Another and far more ambitious composition explores repetitios and asyndetons, consecutively rephrasing scores of times such sentences as: "It's yellow, red, blue, green, pink, brown, and it might be blue, it might be red, but I know what it is: it's just the sun." This kind of fiction, in which style and content are all but indistinguishable because style itself has become the theme, makes up nearly 10 percent of the sample

which was analyzed here.[19] Only two other kinds of fiction were anywhere near so rare as the classic Märchen--lyric poetry and the novel--both of which were produced by one precocious child whose literary talents obviously were of a different order than that of a typical newly literate six-year-old.[20]

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The necessity for examining the newly literate child's creative fiction in light of the oral dimensions of that work is demonstrably of prime concern if we are to avoid the common and drastic misestimation of their creativity and sophistication. Piaget suggests that near word-for-word uniformity in the retelling of a story by a child is an acceptable criterion to establish evidence of verbal cognitive maturation, and Piaget is not alone in his conclusion that a written literary form is the reliable index for evidence of cognitive language development in children; most adult authorities have been deaf to the phenomena of oral conventions and euphonic devices in children's fictive compositions. But to make such an analysis of verbal maturation, one made solely upon verbatim retellings of written forms, totally ignores the newly literates' ability--an ability which is both organic and fundamental--to pick up and hear the sound system of the language and its effects on literary structure. This paper is offered as an invitation to examine the complex problems of creative ability and awareness in young children from this oral, and alternative, perspective.

The present research makes no claim to be an exhaustive treatment of children's primitive fiction. It purports only to promote a more accurate

understanding of the subject and, it is hoped, provide some stimulus to further research. The method used for this purpose was a qualitative analysis of a random sampling of first-grade materials collected over a two-year period, and it is only when the results of many quantitative and qualitative analyses of a much larger corpus can be compared that scholars will have a sufficient understanding of this aspect of children's creative works. Nevertheless, on the grounds of the evidence presented and analyzed in this paper, several conclusions may be tentatively established: (1) Through his projections, both representative and interpretive, the newly literate child shows a marked preference to not merely reduplicated portions of received literature, but to reappraise and reorganize it in relation to his own sense of creative awareness. (2) The most predominate conventional patterns in the newly literate child's fiction are those which most resemble conventional aspects of oral tradition literature. (3) The literature of newly literate children is a sophisticated form of primitive art which should be judged on its own terms, in the context of the broader spectrum of cultural development of literary genres, and not by the standards of contemporary adult literature.

In the preceding discussion it has been presumed that the whole range of oral aspects and conventions in the generic compositions of new literates may be broken down and studied as simple components. For present purposes such a rigorous process of isolation has at least one major and legitimate advantage: it helps bring into focus the reasons why, by high school age if not long before, a child is likely to have "grown out" of narrating stories orally, of using oral conventions extensively, of listening to

and "hearing" the oral dimensions of the language. There is an ostensible and vast preconception among educators, as well as among intellectuals in general, that written style is superior to oral style, that the most formal of modern literary structures must be conformed to even at the expense of the free expression of ideas, that what is "correct" are static and fixed literary conventions, conventions appropriate to silently written compositions. It is hardly surprising, therefore, if a child of sixteen has so sharply broken away from the fundamental techniques and values of oral composition as to consider "childish" the imaginative compositions of six-year-olds, including those done by himself ten years before. What he is far less likely to notice is that in the process of his education a large part of his verbal capacities, and therefore a large part of his capacity for imaginative and creative composition, has been progressively muted and atrophied. If we can show him his loss by pointing to the oral features in the fiction he could once create, there is hope that if he cannot restore his lost powers, he can at least better understand them.

Footnotes

[1] The determination to label the representative compositions of new literates' "primitive fiction" was made primarily on the assumption that the children's first attempts at fictive narrative take on the aspects of their cultural literary heritage as each child reweaves the unique complexities of oral language patterns.

[2] Lev S. Vytgotsky, Thought and Language(Cambridge, Mass., 1962).

[3] Jean Piaget and Barbel Inhelder, The Psychology of the Child (New York, 1969), pp. 89-90.

[4] Ibid., pp. 50-63.

[5] John H. Flavell, "Role-Taking and Communication Skills in Children," Educational Implications of Piaget's Theory, eds. Irene J. Athey and Duane O. Rubadeau (Mass., 1970), pp. 189-190.

[6] I am indebted to the children's teacher, Mrs. Gloria Kaplan, for access to the collection and for the opportunity to observe the children in the act of composition. The stories were collected and transcribed at various times over a period of two years by Mrs. Kaplan and several of her adult assistants in her First Grade class at Oxford Elementary School, Berkeley, California. The school is a public one, and, although these students were not preselected for enrollment on the basis of either intellectual capacity or verbal facility, the majority are dependents of men and women professionals. It is important to note further that but few first grade children are given

the opportunity to compose verbally in an atmosphere as supportive and non-threatening as that maintained by Mrs. Kaplan. The conditions in her classroom undoubtedly foster an unusual degree of constructive creativity.

[7] For an extensive appreciation of the function of oral formula see Albert Lord, The Singer of Tales (Mass., 1964).

[8] The theorized position presented here is, strictly speaking, a refutation of specific conclusions arrived at in these cognition theories which were generated in the discipline of psychology. The apparent similarities in approach between the present study and linguistic theory are for the most part, general and philosophic and do not relate to linguistic methods nor necessarily to linguistic conclusions. It is an hypothesis of this investigation that the study of newly literate six and seven-year-old children's original stories, both written and oral, can expose evidence of verbal habits well beyond linguistic levels generally thought to be the "norm" for this age group. Regardless of the differences in approach between the present study and the methodology of linguistics, the position taken by this author is that any research which contributes to the field of verbal learning has much to contribute to our understanding of natural language. In this way it is possible to regard this study as significant to linguistic research.

[9] John B. Carroll, Language and Thought (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1964), p. 23.

[10] Carolyn Emrick Massod, "The Developing Self: World of Communication," The Child and His Image (Self-Concept in the Early Years), ed. Kaoru Yamamato (Boston, 1972), p. 37.

[11] I have followed Jan Vansina's graphic conception. See Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition, A Study in Historical Methodology, trans. H. M. Wright (London, 1965).

[12] Franz Boaz, "Stylistic Aspects of Primitive Literature," JAF, XXXVIII (1925), pp. 329-339.

[13] In the sample, where there was a greater selection of females to males, the Märchen appeared to be preferred by the females, the males tended to prefer animal tales as their form of primitive fiction.

[14] Only seven of the samples were indeterminate in both style and structure, and nineteen were nonfictive reports (e.g., a retelling of some happening in the child's world recounted verbatim).

[15] The proper naming and classification of English rhetorical figures is a matter of some scholarly dispute. In this work I have attempted therefore to hold to criteria for identification and terminology which are well within the boundaries of most modern systems. A possible exception is my usage of the term "asyndeton" in which I follow the assignment decided upon by Professors William Brandt and Leonard Nathan. See The Rhetoric of Argumentation (New York, 1970), p. 162.

[16] The existence of the planet Vulcan is well-documented in science fiction.

[17] Stith Thompson, The Folktale (New York, 1946), p. 256.

[18] Obscene or scatalogical usage by these authors is never casual or incidental; it is always either masked in euphemisms or made integral to the story's plot and form.

[19] None of these celebrations of style appear to be as conventional in their syntax and forms as "prose poems" composed by adults, but are equally determinate as to their referentials.

[20] This six-year-old composed the first five thousand words of a novel, complete with chapter headings, dramatic scenes, appositional descriptions, plots and subplots, and formal shifts in the positioning of the narrator. Its reliance upon features of oral style is minimal.